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Significant Contributions to Collaborative Scholarship & Tenure

SENIOR ACADEMIC LEADERS are in consensus that, for purposes of tenure, a candidate's significant contributions to collaborative scholarship should be valued highly. That consensus, however, may be as fragile as it is shallow. At an operational level, we do not agree about what counts as potentially significant contributions to collaborative scholarship. At a conceptual level, we appear to conflate three different notions: "independent scholarship," "solo-authored publications," and "significant scholarly work."

The fundamental issue is how to give due weight and proper consideration for purposes of tenure to the intellectual work and scholarly worth of various kinds of contributions. As a group, we are not sure how to value such work as designing and assuring the integrity of a collaborative research project, serving as the content expert on a research team, developing and validating the research instruments used in the project, writing the first solid draft of a scholarly manuscript for publication, being an invited coauthor of a scholarly manuscript, providing the statistical and analytical expertise needed to undertake the project, being the principle investigator of the grant that funds the collaborative project, being the person who had the initial idea for the collaboration, or being the leader of a collaborative research project or team.

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If we who are experienced in making tenure evaluations and tenure decisions year in and year out on candidates from a wide range of disciplines are not in accord, how can we meaningfully discuss tenure expectations in an informed and detailed way with colleagues? How can we supply sound academic leadership or helpful collegial guidance about this to department chairs, tenure-eligible faculty, their mentors, or the faculty who serve on departmental, school-level, or university-level tenure review committees?

Three false starts, three lessons learned

I recall one particularly vexing conversation early in my years as a department chair. Tenured faculty in my department worked by themselves on their individual research projects, but some assistant professors were beginning to collaborate and to publish as coauthors. This was a new thing, believe it or not, to those of us on the departmental evaluation committee. As the department guidelines did not cover this situation, we tried to figure out how to count these coauthored publications using the dreadful point system with which we had saddled ourselves. One senior colleague glibly suggested that however many points we might assign a publication should simply be divided equally among its coauthors. The message he intended to send to his not-yet-tenured colleagues was obvious: every one of his solo-authored articles was automatically at least twice as valuable as any of their coauthored work. How convenient. Many years later at a different institution, a colleague in physics got quite a kick out of the "divide-by-the-number-of-authors" suggestion. He was one of several hundred authors on a couple of

Our understanding of scholarly work and its place in the life of the teaching scholar must continue to expand and evolve



groundbreaking big-science publications. Lesson learned.

Sad to say, but the second approach, “always-trust-the-department,” can backfire too. On more than one occasion, I recall working as a dean with serious-minded groups of faculty leaders to clarify school-level tenure standards. Naturally, we always began by attending to the well-rehearsed differences between the disciplines in our college or school. But, candidly, we knew that some departments were less than fully able or willing to articulate the various ways candidates in their fields could potentially contribute significantly as individuals to collaborative projects. Unfortunately, in some departments influential people expressed serious difficulties with the evolving character and broadening range of what their own larger disciplinary community counted as acceptable forms of scholarly work. Some would not accept certain methodologies, or they did not consider certain kinds of questions as worthy, or they were vaguely suspicious of any work that was interdisciplinary, or they assumed collaboration meant people were getting credit for work not truly their own. In moments of candor, some might confide that they were a bit embarrassed themselves because they simply did not know how to judge the scholarly quality of these different kinds of things.

Departments occasionally suffer internal turmoil because of vested interests, misunderstandings, interpersonal strife, fractious politics, poor processes, or weak management. Some department chairs are better than others at explaining their discipline’s research modalities to those of us from other fields. Not all the tenured faculty of a department contribute useful evaluations of a candidate’s research. External reviews can be compromised by questions about the reviewer’s selection, competence, impartiality, or appreciation of a unique institutional context. Thus, tenure recommendations at the departmental level may not always reflect a broad, informed, unified, objective, and impartial analysis of the quality or the significance of a tenure candidate’s scholarly work.

Every provost or president responsible for the final decision knows that some cases are neither a clear yes nor a clear no. At times, a president or chief academic officer must make a final decision that turns on the central issue of this article: how to evaluate in a fair-minded

and informed way the quality and merit of scholarly contributions made to collaborative research projects.

Faced with this problem, and wanting not to tenure unworthy candidates, some chief academic officers adopt a third approach: demand independent scholarship. For them, the candidate who produces solo-authored publications is the only surely worthy candidate. Thinking they are being rigorous, rather than simply confused, these good colleagues then mistakenly narrow their demand for “independent scholarship” until operationally it equates to “solo-authored publications.” At least with divide-by-the-number-of-authors, a candidate whose only contributions are coauthored would accumulate some points toward tenure. But if solo-authorship is a *sine qua non*, then we really have taken a step backward toward an outmoded, incomplete, and stifling notion of scholarly work.

The lesson learned? If we who have been making tenure decisions cannot untangle the different meanings of “independent scholarship,” “solo-authored publications,” and “significant scholarly work,” then how should we meaningfully discuss these things with colleagues? Again, how should we give well-informed and helpful guidance to deans, chairs, tenure candidates, and faculty on departmental, school-level, or university-level review committees?

Gathering insights from experience

To learn what senior-level academic administrators understand about the nature and significance of individual contributions to collaborative scholarship, I invited many of my colleagues to respond by e-mail to some questions.¹ Do not, however, confuse my opinion gathering with rigorous research. This was merely a convenience sample designed to give friends and colleagues an organized way to participate in an exploratory conversation.

We limited our conversation to collaborative scholarship in applied behavioral science-oriented professional disciplines, such as education, journalism, communication, health and human services, counseling, applied psychology, criminal justice, nursing, and social work. There is no reason, however, to limit the conversations on campuses to these fields. Research paradigms are expanding in almost every discipline, and opportunities as well as demands for collaboration grow. Professional

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journals expect more and more in order to accept submissions for publication, resulting in increasing numbers of coauthored and multi-authored works.

Funding agencies increasingly target multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary questions that require building collaborative research teams. The demand from employers, students, and parents for effective workplace collaboration skills as learning outcomes begs the question whether the academy's historical penchant for solo-scholarship really does best equip faculty to respond knowledgeably to this demand.

As academic leaders, our understanding of scholarly work and its place in the life of the teaching scholar must continue to expand and evolve with these kinds of changes. The problem of sorting out the potentially more significant from the potentially less significant contributions to collaborative scholarship must be raised periodically in every area, from the performing and studio arts to

the physical and behavioral sciences, from mathematics and the humanities to the professional schools.

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The “independent vs. collaborative” distinction is unclear and unhelpful

Fifty-six senior academic administrators responded to my invitation to join the conversation.² Adding my own responses, a total of fifty-seven participated. This ad hoc group included forty-six from top-ranked private Master’s-level regional comprehensive universities and eleven from nationally ranked private research universities. In all, we were five presidents, twenty-eight academic vice presidents, and twenty-four academic deans.³

How we rated the tenure candidate

To anchor our potential responses, we first considered a hypothetical case.⁴ Each of us indicated how that case would likely be viewed at our own institution by estimating the chances of such a candidate being granted tenure using percentages. The fictional case was designed to make the candidate strong in all areas so that no weaknesses would distract from the issue of *independent* scholarship. Every one of us picked a percentage based on the limited information given and without caveat regarding reading an actual file, set of publications, or external reviewer’s comments.⁵

All fifty-seven of us saw the candidate as a good faculty member, someplace in the top 40 percent. In all, fifty-three rated the candidate in the top 20 percent; thirty-three put the candidate in the top 5 percent. Eight of the eleven respondents from doctoral institutions and forty-five of the forty-six respondents from Master’s institutions put the candidate in the top 20 percent. All but one of the deans and all but three of the chief academic officers put the candidate in the top 20 percent. Given this level of consensus, we respondents could be regarded—at least at that point—as more or less equal when it comes to rating the prospects of tenure candidates.

The universally positive judgments expressed about the anticipated success of this case were tempered by caveats regarding institutional mission. One chief academic officer said, “The only issue that might derail this candidate would be a lack of ‘fit’ with the mission. Otherwise this candidate seems very strong.” Some respondents made the connection between institutional mission and the explicitly faith-based or values-based character of their institution. For example, while allowing for “an impressive ecumenical kaleidoscope in terms

of faith traditions, theological understandings, and social orientation,” one dean reported that at his institution “all faculty members must be serious about their Christian faith and practice.”

The case was then tweaked by adding the information that none of the candidate’s publications were solo-authored. Our responses then split down the middle: twenty-eight said that it made no difference, or perhaps even helped the candidate’s case, and twenty-six said this new information hurt the case for tenure.

Those with diminished enthusiasm worried that free-riding as a marginal contributor on the publications of others would be insufficient. While they valued substantial contributions to multi-authored work highly, they now wanted to know more about what the candidate had actually done or not done as part of the collaboration. All three of the fundamentally flawed approaches characterized earlier emerged. Using versions of the divide-by-the-number-of-authors strategy, some proposed giving lesser weight if the other coauthors were already well-established senior scholars or giving greater weight if the candidate were the “first author.” Several respondents said they would defer to the “expectations of the discipline,” although none went all the way to always-trust-the-department. One took the third approach, “I would like to see some evidence of independent, creative scholarship.”

“Independent” gets fuzzy

To close in on the issue at hand, I asked whether a university or a professional school *ought* explicitly to state a requirement that either “collaborative scholarship leading to coauthored publications” or “independent scholarship leading to solo-authored publications” be demanded of all candidates for tenure in applied professional fields.⁶ The terms “independent” and “collaborative” were intentionally left undefined to mirror the way conversations about this complex topic often unfold. At first, people think they are talking about the same thing only to discover through conversation that their conceptualizations are close but not identical.

Written comments on this item revealed some worrisome misunderstandings. For example, at least one person linked collaborative research with “empirical” as contrasted

with “theoretical.” Others associated collaborative work with “interdisciplinary,” as contrasted with research conducted solely within one’s own discipline. One chief academic officer reported having heard it argued that qualitative research cannot be conducted unless it is collaborative. The fuzziness of the concept of “independent” scholarly work was beginning to reveal itself.

Regarding requirements limiting the kind of scholarly work a candidate could present, one chief academic officer summed up the situation for regional comprehensive universities this way: “I think it would be unnecessary and unproductive to dictate the type of publication required at a place . . . where we do not prepare doctoral students, but only undergraduate and master’s-level students.” One dean expressed the majority view succinctly: “Both are acceptable, neither should be required.” Forty-two (74 percent of us) said that both were acceptable modes of scholarly work and that neither should be explicitly demanded as a necessary condition.

Two respondents argued for making tenure candidates demonstrate competence working as independent scholars and as collaborative scholars. They argued that the complexity of the research paradigms that the next generation of senior faculty will have to master in order to be effective as scholars and teachers requires that faculty demonstrate a broad range of research abilities. While thought provoking, these kinds of suggestions were the exceptions, not the norm.

So what really does “independent scholar” mean?

One question asked whether it is possible to be an “independent scholar” without having a solo-authored publication. Forty-two of the senior academic administrators affirmed that these are different things; eleven indicated, however, that it would be highly unlikely that one could be considered an independent scholar without at least one solo-authored publication. But it was the comments that told the tale. Many urged that we needed a more



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complete and probing analysis of the ways candidates might make significant independent contributions to collaborative research projects.

The final question supplied a list of several different ways individuals could potentially make a *significant* contribution to a collaborative scholarly project. Respondents were welcome to endorse as many items from the list as they believed apply. (The results are shown in table 1 below.)

This was a challenging question. “This is tough,” one respondent reported. “Essentially, for me, it boils down to how much knowledge and skill this person brought to the scholarship/research and how much this person shaped the significance of the scholarship.

Sort of leader/director versus follower/worker bee.” One chief academic officer wrote, “this is hard: in a given case, any of those could be tenure-relevant; but any of them (except, I think, ‘lead author’) could be the sign of a marginal role not influencing a decision.” Another respondent said, “it’s difficult to make distinctions in this generalized list.”

The challenge posed by this question further exposed the inadequacies of the “independent vs. collaborative” distinction. It is unclear and unhelpful. As the responses reveal, we are not in accord about where to draw the line between those contributions that are potentially of greater significance and those that are potentially of lesser significance.

Table 1 Significant Contributions

50 (87.7%)	Lead author (journal article, book chapter, monograph)
36 (63.2%)	Person who designed and assured the integrity of the research project
35 (61.4%)	Content expert on the research team for the project being reported
34 (59.6%)	Lead developer of the research instrument(s) created for the study
33 (57.6%)	Leader of the research project team
31 (54.4%)	Person who wrote the first good draft of the manuscript for publication
29 (50.9%)	Person invited to coauthor a journal article, chapter, or monograph
26 (45.6%)	Person who provided data and statistical analysis expertise
23 (40.4%)	Person who had the initial idea for the collaboration
20 (35.1%)	Lead presenter of a paper reporting on the research findings of the study
19 (33.4%)	Person coordinating the work of the research team
17 (29.8%)	Person whose externally funded grant supported the study
12 (21.1%)	Person who refined data-gathering tools
12 (21.1%)	Person whose previously existing dataset was used in the study
10 (17.5%)	Statistician who analyzed some portion of the data in the research study
9 (15.8%)	Person who rewrote the manuscript to respond to reviewers' comments
6 (10.6%)	Research staff who facilitated data gathering from subjects
4 (7.0%)	Person who identified literature review sources for study
3 (5.3%)	Person who rewrote manuscript to fit publisher's editorial specifications
2 (3.5%)	Research staff person who coded or entered respondent data
1 (1.8%)	Person who read and edited the manuscript

An especially telling observation came from a chief academic officer who, after working through the list, said, “I don’t find the meaning of the independent/not independent distinction to be intuitively as clear or as relevant as the significant/not significant distinction.”

Final thoughts:

What advice should we give?

The notion of *independent* scholarship turned out not to be helpful. We did not agree on its meaning or its value at the conceptual level. We were unclear about what it includes and what it excludes at the operational level. Although we all appear ready to endorse the idea that *significant* scholarly contributions must be demanded of tenure candidates, our list offers no sharp limit separating scholarship of greater potential significance from that of lesser potential significance.

That list can serve as a starting point for campus discussions from which analyses and clarifications of the sorts of contributions listed—appropriate to institutional context and sensitive to disciplinary differences—can emerge. With greater knowledge of the real intellectual work of making different kinds of individual contributions to scholarly collaborations, many of our outmoded ideas and misleading ways of talking about this would, one hopes, fall by the wayside.

In closing, I offer two recommendations. First, we senior academic leaders should inform ourselves more fully about the intellectual or artistic work required for successful scholarly collaborations in a very wide range of fields and disciplines. We are mistaken if we believe lead authorship is the only collaborative contribution of potential scholarly significance.

Second, we should engage the academic leadership of our institution in explicating operationally the types of contributions to collaborative scholarship that shall be regarded as potentially of greater or lesser value for purposes of achieving tenure at the institution. Clarity regarding the operational meaning of “potentially significant contributions to collaborative scholarship” is critical for candidates and for those charged with reviewing candidate files. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge and to thank Noreen C. Facione, my wife and frequent research collaborator, for her assistance with the development of the questionnaire, the coding and entering of the data into SPSS, and her insightful advice about the shape and content of this essay. Noreen was the founding director of the Center for Faculty Professional Development at Loyola University Chicago. In that administrative leadership role she worked extensively with faculty mentors, chairs, deans, assistant professors, tenured faculty, and emeriti. The sensitivities gathered from that work informed this project.
2. In sending the e-mail invitations only to academic administrators, I assumed faculty who review tenure cases have benefit of group conversations in their tenure committees when considering and voting on tenure cases. In contrast, academic administrators are more likely to review cases and render their written recommendations working alone. Thus, administrators have less of an opportunity to test any presumptions they might be making about the way research is conducted in a given field or the significance in that field of the various independent contributions of different scholars to a collaborative project.
3. I focused on private institutions believing that, because of traditions of confidentiality and campus cultures of more centralized decision making at private institutions, the chief academic officers, presidents, and academic deans there tend to exercise significantly greater leverage on tenure decision outcomes than do their counterparts at public institutions.
4. The fictional case was described this way: “Consistently excellent teaching and curricular development at the undergraduate and graduate levels, a heavy advising load; exceptional faculty service, positive collegiality, and good leadership skills; and eight or more solid publications in blind peer-reviewed, professional journals relevant to the discipline (education, in this case), some of which are first- or second-tier venues, numerous additional publications including lesser papers, book chapters, and presentations at national professional meetings, at least one substantial competitively awarded external grant, and evidence of the beginnings of national and international recognition through citations, invited presentations, and adoptions of the person’s materials by others for their scholarly uses in the U.S. and abroad.”
5. This is characteristic of experience-based expertise, namely a readiness to make holistic judgments grounded in widely shared cultural understandings—in this case, understandings of what generally to expect of a successful candidate for tenure at a particular institution.
6. Five said, “yes, require collaborative scholarship leading to coauthorship.” Ten said, “Yes, require independent scholarship leading to solo-authorship.” And forty-two said, “no, make neither of these ‘required’.”